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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to provide information and suggestions that may be useful to the volunteer or professional teacher of English who is working with adult Indochinese refugees. In addition to offering general information on language teaching at the adult level, the guide provides information on the linguistic background of the refugees, discusses examples of the types of problems the learners will be likely to encounter, and makes practical suggestions to the teacher. A brief annotated bibliography is also provided, and is divided into three sections: (1) Indochinese Refugee Education Guides produced by the National Indochinese Clearinghouse, and available free of charge; (2) helpful background and resource material for the teacher or volunteer; and (3) suggested text materials. (Author/DE)

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1.

ADULT EDUCATION SERIES: Teaching English to Adult Refugees

Introduction

This paper is intended to provide information and suggestions that may be useful to either the volunteer or professional teacher of English who is working with adult refugees. It will give very brief information on language teaching at this level, some information on the language background of such students, discuss a few examples of the types of problems that they may have in learning English and make some practical suggestions to the teacher. A very brief bibliography is also provided.

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Language Learning for Adults

As many of us know from our own experience, adults find it less easy than young children to learn a new language in a natural, informal situation where they are only exposed to the language. We also know, however, that if the adult sees the relevance and usefulness of the new language for his practical purposes, he is more likely to be consciously motivated, to concentrate and work harder than a child may in the formal classroom situation. What is important to remember is that adults can, and do learn new languages very well, but they need more specific and formal instruction. It is also important to remember that learning a new language needs a great deal of effort and time for most adults, though some appear to have greater ease than others in learning new languages.

Why most adults differ from children in language learning ability is not yet well understood by scholars, but it is generally agreed that at least in part it is because after the age of puberty the rules and words of one's own language (or languages) seem to be more firmly established, so that the carry-

over from the mother tongue to the new language is stronger.[1] There are also probably differences in attitude between adults and young children about the learning and use of other languages, with adults having more inhibitions in adopting new language behaviors.

There are two very important aspects of teaching English to Indochinese adults which teachers should bear in mind. First, what is taught should, as much as possible, be related to the actual context of the student's life so that what he is doing in the classroom (including such aspects as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical items, situations and ideas) will have some effect on how well he will communicate in English in the world outside.

Second, it is important that each lesson is well planned, the items to be learned carefully selected and presented, and the lesson so structured that the student clearly understands what he hears, and, as important, is given ample opportunity to practice the language by participating in meaningful situations. This will help to overcome his shyness in using the language, and help him learn by actually using the new language.

The Language Background of Students

Adult students among Indochinese refugees are likely to be familiar with situations in which a variety of languages are spoken. It is possible that many of them speak more than one language themselves. A brief sketch of the language situation in each of the countries which these students left before coming to the United States may help the teacher in understanding the language background of these students.

South Vietnam

The official language of South Vietnam was Vietnamese, a language which has many resemblances to Chinese and has been strongly influenced by it through centuries of cultural contact. It was spoken by most, but not all Vietnamese. Its present writing system, like English, uses Roman characters.

A long history of association with France (nearly 100 years of French rule ending in 1954) had given French a very important position in Vietnam so that

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[1] See "Teaching English Pronunciation to Vietnamese", GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES #4, for a discussion of such carry-over.

it was by far the best-known foreign language. Knowledge of French was widespread in the cities where all persons who had completed secondary school read and spoke it fluently and many less well educated people including merchants, army veterans, civil servants, etc. had some familiarity with it. French was used unofficially for a variety of social and some educational purposes, especially in French schools. During the recent war English gained considerable importance and in Saigon it had become the second foreign language for the younger generation. Its major use for communication was with the American armed forces.

Vietnam had a number of minority groups who spoke their own languages but also Vietnamese. Among these the most important were the Chinese, most of whom lived with their own community near Saigon.

All Vietnamese who completed secondary school had studied both French and English, though English was started generally later and not used as a medium of instruction.

Cambodia

The official language of Cambodia was Khmer (or Cambodian). It was the mother tongue of some 85% of the population and contributed to national cohesion in the country. Compared to other major languages of mainland Southeast Asia, it is more given to using complex words and it allows a wider variety of patterns in putting consonants and vowels together in a single syllable. One very important difference between the language of the Cambodian refugees and those of the others is that Khmer does not use tone to show differences in the meaning of words. This has important implications for both comprehension and production of English by Cambodians. The writing system, based on an Indian system, is an alphabet. Because of a very long history of primary education in monastery schools, a large proportion (about 85%) of Cambodians can read their own language. Many, especially in the upper classes, are also literate in French.

As in South Vietnam, French influence has been strong in Cambodia through historical association of nearly 100 years (1863 to 1953). This influence, in its cultural aspects, was perhaps stronger in Cambodia than in Vietnam, and the French language had more established use during the French colonial period.

After independence French continued to be taught in primary schools and used as a medium of instruction in secondary schools, though the use of the

Khmer language has increased in recent years. French is the second language of the country after Khmer, and is used in business. English has had much less importance in Cambodia than in Vietnam.

Cambodia had some minority groups. Of these the Chinese were the most numerous, though they formed only about 4% of the population. They spoke several different dialects of Chinese and were important in trade and commerce.

Laos

The official language of Laos was Laotian, a language similar to Chinese and Thai, and like them using tone to differentiate the meaning of words. It was the mother tongue of only half the population but was fairly widely understood and used as a lingua franca by minority groups who lived in the highlands of Laos. These groups spoke a variety of tribal languages and dialects. The rate of literacy was only 20% in Laos.

French was the second official language in Laos and was used in government, commerce, etc. As in Vietnam and Cambodia, French had a very important role during the colonial occupation of the country by France. After independence in 1953 French continued to be used as an official language and as a medium of instruction in secondary schools. Laotian, however, was gaining importance. English had gained some importance but it was not widely used.

A substantial group among the refugees in the U.S. from Laos are Black Tais, or Tai Dam, who had moved to Laos mainly from North Vietnam some thirty years previous to their coming to the U.S.

Some Linguistic Problems for Adult Indochinese Learners of English

It has already been stated that a considerable amount of the linguistic problems of Indochinese students are likely to be a result of carry-over from their own languages. This carry-over is sometimes referred to as "interference" from the mother tongue, or, occasionally, from previously learned languages. These problems, of course, are only part of the difficulties students will have, but if the teacher has some information about what may be the root cause of the widespread difficulties these students have, it will make the task of teaching easier.

It has also been stated that Vietnamese, Laotian and Black Tai are

languages that rely on tone (or the tune of the speaker's voice) in addition to vowel and consonant sounds, to show differences in meaning. For example, in Vietnamese mai (tomorrow) is a different word from hai (two) because there is a difference in the 'h' and 'm' sounds at the beginning of these words. This is like what happens in English. But two other words ma 'ghost', pronounced with a neutral tone; and má 'mother' pronounced with a high rising tone, are different in meaning not because of a difference in vowel and consonant sounds (since these are the same in both words) but because the tone, or tune, with which they are spoken is different.

One effect of this will be that speakers of tone languages are likely to be very sensitive to changes in the tune of the speaker's voice when they hear English. There is a danger that they may assume differences that do not exist. For a fuller discussion of problems related to tone and interference from the mother tongue, readers should consult Teaching English Pronunciation to Vietnamese or Teaching English Pronunciation to Speakers of Black Tai (Tai Dam), No. 4 and No. 10 respectively of the GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES.

The Cambodian language does not rely on tone to show differences in meaning in words. Khmer-speaking students, therefore, may have fewer problems in understanding spoken English, and in learning to use English sentence melody.

In Vietnamese (and languages of the Tai family) only the following sounds can occur at the ends of words. They are 'm', 'n', 'ng', 'p', 't', and 'k'. In their own languages, therefore, speakers never have occasion to make distinctions in the ends of words like those between English 'hit' and 'hid'; 'wick' and 'wig'; and 'mop' and 'mob'. The pronunciation of 'd', 'g' and 'b' presents a formidable obstacle to Vietnamese (and other) learners of English.

The tonal languages of Southeast Asia have very few sequences of sounds comparable to consonant clusters in English. In Vietnamese clusters are limited to ones containing 'w'. The sound in the beginning of Vietnamese xuân 'spring' is much like English 'swung'. Words like 'flexed', 'drenched', 'splints', present enormous problems above and beyond mastering the individual sounds.

Like the speakers of many other languages (such as Spanish, Greek and Tagalog), speakers of Southeast Asian languages find it difficult to distinguish

between the vowel sounds in 'deep' and 'dip'. These two sounds are distinct in English before a variety of consonants in many words such as 'team' and 'Tim'; 'heat' and 'hit'; 'scene' and 'sin'; 'leap' and 'lip'; 'leak' and 'lick' and so on. Learning to both hear and produce these differences is a major problem for Indochinese adults learning English.

Differences between the grammatical systems of these languages and that of English also cause interference problems. The following are a few examples, but readers should consult forthcoming Refugee Education Guides for a fuller discussion of the subject.

One major grammatical difference between these languages and English is that they do not use suffixes, so the suffixes in English cause problems. For instance, verbs in these languages are used in their basic form only, with no use of such devices as -ed to show past tense, e.g. 'walk' and 'walked'. Instead, past tense is often in no way specified in a sentence when it can be inferred from the general situation; when absolutely necessary, an adverb is used to indicate past time. (An adverb may also be used to indicate future.) Thus, the required use in English of special forms such as 'walked', 'coughed' or 'loaded' and so on is entirely different from their own way of speaking and frequently proves difficult to remember to do correctly.

It is important to remember that many Indochinese adult students, because of the language background of their countries, have come in contact with French and possess some command of it. Since French uses endings more than English, the idea of showing grammatical meaning through some change in words may not be too unfamiliar to them. Teachers who know French may draw parallels between it and English to point out grammatical usage in English.

In Vietnamese, adjectives are like verbs in that they serve to form sentences when combined with a subject: chuoi chin (banana ripe) can mean "The bananas are ripe". Consequently, one task of the Vietnamese student of English is to learn to always include a form of the verb 'be' in sentences like this.

One important aspect to remember in teaching English to Vietnamese and other Indochinese adults is that in their native language such things as forms of address to people are highly structured and reflect long-standing social traditions. Vietnamese, for instance, has a system of personal pronouns and personal "classifiers" that indicate status relationships. Age, education, personal achievement and official rank command respect. Such respect is

reflected in speech as well as behavior. The choice of terms addressing people has many subtleties, and the choice of wrong terms may be offensive. The simple greeting of "Good morning" in English, for instance, translates into Vietnamese as a variety of expressions, the choice of which would depend on the rank and status of the addressee, and those of the speaker.

Suggestions to Teachers

Language learning is a very complex process, and many factors enter into it. Methods of language teaching are important, especially in the case of adults, but teachers should remember that the most important factor is the innate ability of human beings to learn language. If they can be motivated, helped to understand what they are learning, and given adequate practice in using the language, they are likely to learn a great deal. An understanding of the special difficulties of the student is an added advantage to the teacher. Both similarities and differences between the student's language and the new language can be utilized in teaching.

As a well known psycholinguist has stated, the learning of a second language requires both the acquisition of knowledge about rules and the formation of habits described by these rules. Two major approaches to language teaching are involved here. One is based on the idea that repetition and drill of the forms of the new language will help the learner to overcome problems (including interference from his mother tongue) and help him internalize new patterns that will make it easier for him to function in the language being learned. Practice of this kind can be very varied. One of the most effective uses of repetitions and drills is perhaps in the teaching of pronunciation. The production of consonant clusters in English, for instance, may need considerable repetition and drill for Indochinese adults.

The second approach centers around language learning taking place in meaningful situations with communication as a vital part of the learning process. Many teachers also say that students should be helped in understanding and learning the rules of the new language so that their use of it may be governed by an awareness of these rules. One good use of this kind of approach is in the teaching of grammatical usage. For instance, Vietnamese students can be reminded to use a form of the verb 'be' with sentences that have a subject and predicate adjective.

Principles Teachers Should Bear in Mind

1. One of the most important things is to have specific goals for each lesson (as well as the entire course) and to make sure that these goals are achieved to the best of the abilities of teachers and students. Methods and materials can only be well utilized if the aims and goals of teaching are clear and definite. It is very important that students understand these goals, desire to attain them, and see the relevance of classroom activity (such as sound drills, situational activity, dialogues, etc.) for attaining the goals.

2. It is very important that each lesson be carefully planned. Whenever possible the presentation of language items should take place in meaningful situations which will simulate the actual situations in which the language is likely to be used. Within this framework, the language items should be carefully sequenced, building on what is known, introducing new material in carefully controlled steps, and giving a great deal of practice in the use of what is learned. The selection of a good textbook can be very important in this respect. (See GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES: Teaching English as a Second Language--Textbooks.) In most classes there will be both a range of competence in English, and a difference in the rate of learning by different students. The teacher should make allowances for this and see that all students can advance.

3. Cultural aspects, especially for Indochinese adults, can be of very great importance. Cross-cultural conflicts, such as social status, can greatly affect class performance. For instance it would help if classes were socially homogeneous, such as professional people in one section, fishermen and farmers in another, women in one class, men in another, etc. It is very difficult to overcome the socio-cultural aspects of learning, and anything that can be done to make the learning environment close to that of Vietnam or Cambodia will help the student to concentrate and participate. See A Handbook for Teachers of Vietnamese Students: Hints for Dealing with Cultural Differences in Schools.

4. Part of any good lesson is finding out whether students have learned each new item, and, at the end of the lesson, how far the goals set for it have been achieved. See Helping Other People Learn English.

Bibliography

This Bibliography is divided into three sections: A) Indochinese Refugee Education Guides produced by the National Indochinese Clearinghouse, and available free of charge; B) Helpful background and resource material for the teacher or volunteer; C) Suggested text material.

A. Refugee Education Guides

1. Hints for Tutors
2. Testing English Language Proficiency
3. Teaching English Pronunciation to Vietnamese
4. Teaching English Pronunciation to Tai Dam
5. Teaching English to Vietnamese: Textbooks
6. A Brief Look at the Vietnamese Language: Sounds and Spellings
7. Teaching English to Vietnamese: Syntax (forthcoming)
8. Teaching English to Adults: A Selected Bibliography (forthcoming)

B. Background and Resource Material

1. Duong Thanh Binh. A Handbook for Teachers of Vietnamese Students: Hints for Dealing with Cultural Differences in Schools. Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975. $1.00.

2. A Guide to Two Cultures. Washington, D.C.: Task Force for Indochina Refugees, c/o Dept. of HEW, 1975. Free.

3. Bowen, J. Donald. Patterns of English Pronunciation. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1975. $5.95.

   For any level students, a graded presentation of the sounds of English, first individually, then in combinations. Lots of exercises, usable transcription system.

3. Finocchiaro, Mary. English as a Second Language: From Theory to Practice. New York: Regents, 1974. $3.25. Paperback.

   Newly revised practical guide to curriculum planning, lesson planning, adaptation of materials and language testing. Discusses specific techniques for teaching pronunciation, grammar, reading and writing. Appendix contains useful definitions, an extensive bibliography.

4. Nilsen, Don L.F., and Alleen Pace Nilsen. Pronunciation Contrasts in English. New York: Regents Publishing Co., 1973. $2.25.

   This is a collection of lists of minimal pairs, with each list labeled for languages in which the contrast doesn't exist. The introduction gives a briefing on phonetics, some sample exercises, and instructions on how to use the book.

5. Stevick, Earl W. Helping People Learn English. New York: Abingdon Press, 1957. $3.00.

   This is a small, down-to-earth, sane, sensible book which is expressly designed to acquaint the non-experienced native speaker of English with the ins and outs of teaching English as a second language. It gives general guidelines on teaching pronunciation, and an easy-to-understand introduction to the mechanics of pronunciation. The sections on teaching grammar are equally good.

C. Text Material

While there are many texts that can be used for adults (see item #8 under Refugee Education Guides above), the three texts mentioned here can be easily used by the non-professional ESL teacher because they are each accompanied by very good "Teachers' Manuals".

1. Iwataki, Sadae, and others. English as a Second Language, A New Approach For the 21st Century. San Juan Capistrano, California: MODULEARN, Inc., 1973-74. Student Materials, about $3.25 per set.

   Materials produced and published originally as the Asian Project, Division of Career and Continuing Education, Adult Basic Education Program, Los Angeles Unified School District, they are designed to meet the needs of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Filipino adults learning English in California, and as such are especially suitable for Vietnamese adults. Volumes I-III consist of 20 lessons each for beginning English, each of which includes a lesson guide for teachers, a student leaflet for reading and writing practice and home study, an evaluation lesson guide, and a student evaluation form. Volume IV contains transparency masters to accompany the materials in earlier volumes. Volume V is an intermediate text which can be used independently or in sequence with the other volumes. Volume VI is a pronunciation text geared to the problems of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Tagalog speakers, but contains much that is directly relevant to speakers of Vietnamese. Volume VII is a teachers' guide to the language problems of Asians, again geared to speakers of the languages mentioned earlier, but relevant to Vietnamese. The entire set of eight volumes can be bought together ($45.00); the student materials are available separately.

2. Mackey, Ilonka Schmidt. English 1: A Basic Course for Adults. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1972. Students' book, $2.75.

   A one-book basic English course for zero-level students at upper secondary and adult level. Book's aim is to give learners the English they need immediately on arrival, to provide the basis for more thorough study, and to furnish review for students whose English is sketchy. Material is carefully controlled to give immediately useful structures and vocabulary. Detailed teachers' manual available. Especially suitable for adult education programs and teachers with no special training in ESL.

3. Slager, William, and others. English For Today, 2nd Ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 1972. Books I - VI, about $4.50 each. Paperback.

   Newly-revised edition of a series which was extensively used in Vietnam. The six books take the student up to a full command of spoken and written English. Detailed teachers' manuals are available, as are cue cards, wall charts and tapes.